

TRAVELING IN TOYLAND

Welcome! Whether you are an old hand at this child's play or just entering the sand-box we hope this training changes you: not just by honing your skills but by helping you to see the work through new lenses and perhaps from different angles. We are mindful of how difficult the job has become but also, how critical it is that your investment bear long-term dividends.

To do this work well, you need to dredge up old memories that drifted out of sight long ago—good riddance! No, welcome them back to morning circle, to show and tell. But this time with respect for the child, the parents, the family and your heavy lifting of the moving parts to shape a better whole. To the child you may become a beloved aunt or uncle, a hated parent, a safe haven, or the enemy. Don't be surprised by the intensity of feelings a child may quickly, sometimes too quickly, develop for you. And don't be seduced by love. We all want to feel special but we don't need to feel special. You are not a replacement for what's gone wrong or what's missing; You are a special friend with a job to do.

Instinct and intuition, liberally sprinkled with common sense and uncommon courtesy, matter. There is no place for arrogance where "the child is the father to the man." Be wary of your own old ghosts and careful not to find them where they're not. Stay in the gray zone of uncertainty—that is every child's, every parent's world; join them. Be willing not to know (not our forte) and to turn to more experienced hands for checking your oil and your biases.

Being a child is hard; being a parent is harder. Judge not and be mindful of snap judgments and irrational bias. Parents do awful deeds more often from dread than cruelty. Maintain an open mind and strive for impassioned neutrality. In this role as advocate for the child keep your eye on the prize but watch out for well-meaning rescue efforts—you don't own the ship, you're a passenger sitting at the Captain's table. Learn the limits of your role and respect boundaries; good fences do make good neighbors. There are seductions in this swamp—be wary of the quicksand and make haste slowly.

In your role as GAL, you are advocating for the child's best interest—**what they need; not what they want.** In cases of parental alienation, where children appear to reject one parent, your mettle will be tested and your skills as a private eye refined. Many of your young clients

are already experts at playing both sides against the middle. Watch where you step in the muddle.

In your role as AMC, you may be even more divided: the law asks you to represent your child-client and your client's preferences, while at the same time, keeping an eye on that the child's needs. Sometimes it is even harmful to your client to ask her what she prefers. And when her needs and her wants diverge, it is really a muddle being in the middle.

There is another nostrum you may profit from: Hold your ground! You're amongst attorneys who have already taken sides, sometimes fiercely so. In the hierarchy of power they will diminish your authority or attempt to bring you to their crap game. Stay put and your power will grow. If you need allies, and you will, the mental health expert and the bench are likely to better serve than your colleagues in the law. Neutrality is power—don't give it away.

This is good work, important work. Wear your heart and your pride on your sleeve but dress in old clothes. Let your hair down but be willing to lose at chess or checkers. And remember—play, not words, is the language of childhood. Listen to the music--there's where pay-dirt lies. It's at recess where you'll learn important truths simply by watching, not asking. We are steeped in the power of words. Now you must sharpen your eyes and ears for the non-verbal world of gesture, nuance, facial expression, clothes, posture and pets. When you finish this training you will have begun to know the questions. The answers will come later. Meanwhile, swing on the rings and enjoy the breeze. Go fly a kite!

ATTITUDES and ATTRIBUTES for GALs and AMCs.

Self Awareness

Identify personal biases, and assumptions and world views based on your own past – how are they coloring how you see this child's world?

Search for unconscious influences

Know what you do not know – and figure out how to learn it or who to call

When is your gut instinct helpful – great insight; and when is it not helpful – blind spot

Tough Skin and Being Able to Stand the Heat:

You are in a world of unhappiness, and you can become a target. You can find yourself swimming in a hot & toxic soup.

Ambiguity and Open Minds:

Learn to tolerate ambiguity and stay away from premature diagnoses: gray is the best color here. Avoid falling in love with your own ideas and templates: This is not a “one-size fits all” world: what has worked with some families will not work for all because they are all individuals. Revel in the uniqueness of each child.

Urgency:

Every second, more of the child's childhood disappears and she is stuck in a topsy turvy world that is very, very scary. Every child thinks that *Divorce Stinks*. Get busy and get these people to accept that they have to reconfigure their family fast, so that the child can get on with her hard work of being a kid!

Pride in the Role, Humility in the Work:

This is not a popularity contest and you are not a rubber stamp

Accept peer review and seek out feedback

Become an expert in this job – the law, the resources; accept that you are not an expert in each family – they are the experts in their own lives, and you are an observer

Accept that some others will denigrate this role.

Emotions and Emotional Facts:

Emotions are not “noisy static” and are certainly not irrelevant; they are often key considerations that cannot and should not be ignored. Listen to what they tell you about this family, its weaknesses, and its strengths.

Limits:

You can - and should - keep boundaries and set expectations, and take comfort that you can do best for the child with clear lines.

You have limits and so does this job. You will not save the world. You can usually make it better.

Strength:

Avoid seeing everything only as negative and as a deficit. Can you find the strengths that the family members possess, and build something solid from there? Even harder, can you get them to see each other's strengths?

Bias:

You are impartial as to the parents and fair in how you approach both parents, but you are never unbiased or neutral: you have a strong bias in favor of whatever is best for the child, and you are not neutral about the result. The result for the child must be within your range of acceptable outcomes. Do all this without taking sides.

Community:

Each family is part of a bigger community; it may not be your community. Make it your job to find out about theirs, and leave your own behind. The solution will have to work in their world, not yours.

Danger:

You may need to protect yourself from direct attack, legally and physically. You also need to recognize vicarious trauma and burn out, coming from the inside. There is danger, as well, from getting too close, and enjoying the power too much.